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TAGS: EG, IS, PINR

SUBJECT: INTSUM 532 - MARCH 30, 1978

LONDON FOR KINSOLVING

PARIS FOR NICHOLAS MURPHY
OTHER ADDRESSEES FOR CHIEFS OF MISSION

1. ISRAEL. DURING YESTERDAY'S KNESSET DEBATE, BEGIN STOUTLY DEFENDED HIS POLICIES ON KEY ISSUES. EMBASSY TEL AVIV COMMENTED THAT THERE WAS NOTHING NEW IN THE PRIME MINISTER'S STATEMENT AND NO INDICATION OF ANY RETHINKING OR MOVEMENT AWAY FROM HIS PREVIOUS POSITIONS. REGARDING THE US, HE TOOK PAINS TO PICTURE THE US-ISRAELI RELATIONSHIP AS REMAINING ON SOLID GROUND, DESPITE DIFFERENCES OVER POLICY.

2. MUCH OF BEGIN'S ADDRESS FOCUSED ON THE WEST BANK ISSUE. HE REITERATED ISRAELI OPPOSITION TO TOTAL WITHDRAWAL, A WEST BANK REFERENDUM AND PALESTINIAN SELF-DETERMINATION. HE REVIEWED HIS AUTONOMY PLAN, SAYING THAT IT WOULD GIVE WEST BANKERS CONTROL OVER THEIR DAILY LIVES. HE ALSO CLAIMED THAT THE US HAD AGREED DURING HIS LATEST WASHINGTON VISIT ISRAELI MILITARY FORCES SHOULD BE ALLOWED TO REMAIN ON THE WEST BANK AND GAZA. HE DID NOT SPECIFICALLY REITERATE HIS POSITION THAT 242 DOES NOT APPLY TO THE WEST BANK.

3. OPPOSITION LABOR LEADER PERES, IN REPLY, CRITICIZED BEGIN FOR THE DAMAGE THE LIKUD GOVERNMENT HAS INFLICTED ON ISRAEL'S CREDIBILITY AND FOR HIS HANDLING OF THE NEGOTIATIONS. PERES STRESSED THAT 242 APPLIES TO THE WEST BANK AND THAT BEGIN COULD NOT ALTER THIS POLITICAL
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REALITY, ESPECIALLY SINCE THERE IS A NATIONAL CONSENSUS FOR TERRITORIAL COMPROMISE THERE.

4. BEGIN'S PERFORMANCE DURING THE DEBATE IS ANOTHER STEP IN SHORING UP HIS POLITICAL POSITION AT HOME. ALTHOUGH HIS PUBLIC STANDING HAS SUFFERED IN RECENT WEEKS BECAUSE OF GROWING STRAINS WITH THE US AND A PUBLIC PERCEPTION THAT HE IS LOSING CONTROL OVER UNRULY MINISTERS, THE PRIME MINISTER'S CURRENT EFFORT TO BOLSTER HIS POSITION IS ASSISTED BY:

(A) A WIDESPREAD SENSE THAT ISRAEL MUST CLOSE RANKS AGAINST US PRESSURE; AND

(B) THE ALLEGATION THAT A SENIOR US OFFICIAL HAD SUGGESTED REMOVING BEGIN FROM THE PREMIERSHIP.

5. THE CLOSING OF RANKS HAS OCCURRED DESPITE CONTINUING TENSIONS WITHIN THE LIKUD COALITION, WHERE THERE IS CRITICISM OF BEGIN'S TACTICS ON KEY ISSUES SUCH AS SETTLEMENTS. EVEN SOME IN HERUT BELIEVE THAT BEGIN'S FAILURE TO DISCIPLINE SHARON HAS ERODED ISRAEL'S STANDING

IN US PUBLIC OPINION. HAWKS IN HERUT AND LA'AM CRITICIZE BEGIN FOR HIS WEST BANK PLAN AND FOR "EXCESSIVE" CONCESSIONS ON SINAI TO SADAT.

6. IN THE LIBERAL PARTY, THERE IS AGREEMENT WITH WEIZMAN'S CONCERN THAT BEGIN IS NOT DOING ENOUGH TO PROMOTE NEGOTIATIONS WITH EGYPT. THIS DISSATISFACTION HAS BEEN INCREASED BY BEGIN'S OPPOSITION TO THE LIBERAL CANDIDATE FOR THE PRESIDENCY. MOREOVER, BEGIN ANNOUNCED YESTERDAY THAT MK HOROWITZ, FROM LA'AM AND A STAUNCH SUPPORTER OF THE PRIME MINISTER, WOULD HAVE GREATER RESPONSIBILITIES AS A NEW ECONOMIC "CZAR." THIS ACTION IS A SLAP AT FINANCE MINISTER ERHLICH AND HIS LIBERAL COLLEAGUES WHO HAVE DOMINATED ECONOMIC POLICY. CONFIDENTIAL

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7. DESPITE THIS DISSATISFACTION, BEGIN HAS HAD NO DIFFICULTY IN BURYING WEIZMAN'S INITIATIVE TO BROADEN THE COALITION. WEIZMAN ERRED BADLY IN THE TIMING OF HIS PROPOSAL, AND HIS IMPROPRIETY IN INDIRECTLY ATTACKING THE PRIME MINISTER AT A TIME OF SERIOUS ISRAELI-US TENSION HAS REVIVED THE VIEW THAT WEIZMAN SHOOTS FROM THE HIP. IN ADDITION, HIS MARCH 24 INTERVIEW AND HIS EARLIER THREAT TO RESIGN IF WORK ON NEW SETTLEMENTS WAS NOT SUSPENDED DURING HIS VISIT TO THE US HAVE CAST A CLOUD OVER HIS FUTURE. THE PRIME MINISTER'S ANIMOSITY IS NOW ASSURED, AND HE MAY BEGIN TO GROOM A DARK HORSE FROM HERUT AS WEIZMAN'S SUCCESSOR OR TO SHOW MORE FAVOR TOWARD SHARON.

8. THE LABOR PARTY REMAINS POWERLESS TO DO MUCH TO ALTER BEGIN'S POLICY. FOR POLITICAL, POLICY, AND IDEOLOGICAL REASONS, LABOR WOULD NOT BE REGARDED AS A DESIRABLE COALITION PARTNER BY EITHER THE LIBERAL PARTY OR THE NRP, AND WITHOUT AT LEAST ONE OF THESE PARTIES, PLUS THE DMC, AN ALTERNATIVE COALITION COULD NOT REPLACE THE LIKUD GOVERNMENT IN THE PRESENT KNESSET.

9. THE DMC, FOR ITS PART, IS BADLY DIVIDED BY PERSONNEL AND POLICY DISPUTES. YADIN'S INEFFECTUALITY AS PARTY LEADER, IN CONJUNCTION WITH THE APPREHENSION OF DOVISH ELEMENTS THAT THE CHANCE FOR PEACE MAY BE LOST BECAUSE OF BEGIN'S IDEOLOGICAL RIGIDITY, COULD LEAD TO A PARTY SPLIT OR THE DMC'S DEPARTURE FROM THE COALITION. ALTHOUGH THE DEFECTION OF THE DMC WOULD REDUCE BEGIN'S KNESSET MAJORITY FROM 18 TO 3, THE LIKUD-AGUDA COALITION COULD CARRY ON, ESPECIALLY IN VIEW OF THE FRAGMENTATION OF THE OPPOSITION. (CONFIDENTIAL) COOPER CONFIDENTIAL

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